

April 2, 2008 Wednesday

## Money not well spent at worst possible time

State Controller John Chiang was absolutely right to order the state lottery to repay the public \$46,336 it spent to pay for a fancy party for its workers.

Like the chances of winning the lottery itself, there was a one in 10 million chance that this shindig was worth the money, the public's money, we add.

The lavish party, which had been disguised as a worker-recognition party and training event, included entertainment, prizes and prime-rib dinners for lottery employees, retirees and their guests.

The party has become the poster child for conspicuous consumption of taxpayer money. Chiang found that the five such employee dinners prior to this one had only cost slightly more than \$60,000 combined.

This party was clearly an outrageous waste of taxpayer funds. What is even more outrageous is that Lottery Director Joan Borucki has not already found a way to repay the money. Instead, she says she is waiting for an attorney general's opinion on the matter.

Why on Earth does she need an opinion? If she cannot see that this was a profound error in judgment, then maybe she is in the wrong job.

At her Senate confirmation hearing, which happened after the scandal broke, she promised to offset the costs of the event by cutting administrative expenses. Based on that assertion, the Senate confirmed her appointment. Now, she suddenly needs an attorney general's opinion?

The list of extravagances runs from silver-plated photo frames that cost nearly \$4,500 to spending \$2,000 for a photographer and spending \$2,500 for table decorations.

Yes, table decorations.

The lottery spent another \$5,000 to hire a former "Big Spin" host as the emcee for the evening as well as allotting nearly \$11,000 to spend on prizes for the employees.

If that was not outrageous enough - and, for the record, we think it was pretty outrageous - Chiang's audit also found that the lottery had been making donations to charitable causes as well. Mind you, we are talking about public money here.

The lottery spent more than \$2,500 in a contribution to the Poway Unified School District Fire Relief Fund and nearly \$1,900 for thesauruses, dictionaries, pencils and graduation owl figurines for table decorations - these folks do seem to like to decorate tables.

We are all in favor of charitable work, but it is completely wrongheaded for a public agency to disperse public money to charities without any kind of process.

If this gala were the only misuse of scarce public funds, we wouldn't raise a stink, but these sorts of parties occur with greater frequency in Sacramento and other centers of power than one might think.

While \$46,000-plus might not seem much when the state faces a \$16 billion budget deficit, the poor example this party sets for fiscal prudence - it could pay the salary of a public school teacher, after all - can't be more obvious.